



Museums Empowered

Sample Application ME-251758-OMS-22
Project Category: Evaluation

Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago

Amount awarded by IMLS:	\$207,501
Amount of cost share:	\$217,506

The Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago will implement training for visitor-facing staff and managers to both improve audience engagement and evaluate visitor experiences. The museum will build an internal team of staff members who are trained in the evaluation of social and emotional engagement and learning. An external consultant will train full-time staff to conduct evaluation within the museum, including qualitative and quantitative evaluation methodologies; further the development of the museum's evaluative strategy to include social and emotional learning outcomes for visitors; develop a library of evaluation resources; and improve the museum's exhibit development processes based on audience feedback. The project will expand the museum's evaluation program cross-departmentally and integrate evaluation into institutional planning and processes, thereby allowing the museum to better serve its audiences.

Attached are the following components excerpted from the original application.

- Narrative
- Schedule of Completion

When preparing an application for the next deadline, be sure to follow the instructions in the current Notice of Funding Opportunity for the grant program and project category to which you are applying.

1. PROJECT JUSTIFICATION

Needs to be Addressed and How They Were Identified: The Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA) Chicago's strategic plan includes the goal of building Chicago's sense of community through fostering empathy and civic agency. We intend to meet this goal, in part, by increasing the meaningful social, emotional, and learning of visitors to our exhibitions and performances. This project will implement new training for visitor-facing staff to both facilitate and evaluate visitor experiences, expanding the evaluation program across departments. The outcomes-based data gathered will enable us to refine our plan for effective interaction with visitors and increase our ability to foster Chicago's social belonging.

This plan to facilitate and evaluate visitors' social and emotional learning (SEL) was prompted both by our audiences, who are seeking to connect with others and expand their horizons, and by our vision to build Chicago's social belonging (often referred to as social cohesion in the literature; see Lanzi, 2011 for a definition and framework). To meet visitor needs and fulfill our vision, we must facilitate experiences that increase visitors' social awareness and relationship skills. At the same time, the Museum recently re-organized the Visitor Engagement team from part-time to full-time. This change presents an opportunity to move the Museum's evaluation program from one that utilized volunteer college students, to one that relies on a highly trained, cross-departmental internal evaluation team. Professional development in evaluation thinking and practices for our curatorial, interpretation, and visitor experience staff will increase our capacity to think evaluatively, ask meaningful questions, collect rigorous data, analyze and interpret findings, and apply our learning to our practices of visitor engagement and interpretation. Consistently engaging in the evaluative process improve our facilitation of critical visitor interactions.

MCA Chicago Audience Needs

Recent studies (La Placa Cohen and & Campbell Rinker, 2014; La Placa Cohen & Slover Linett, 2017) indicated that fun, enjoyment, and spending meaningful time with family and friends were the greatest motivators for attending a museum. This is also consistent with the MCA's studies of its exhibition audiences. Using Falk's *Identity and the Museum Visitor Experience* (2009) and the visitor motivation identities it describes to understand the reasons our visitors come to the museum, the MCA's research suggests that many visitors are "facilitators," people who come to spend meaningful time with loved ones, or "explorers," people who come to expand their horizons, rather than to partake in specific content. Similarly, a study by arts and culture audience research firm Slover Linett of MCA's potential audiences found that these prospective visitors—who were Black and Latinx families and creative professionals--saw the museum visit primarily as a social experience to be shared with family and friends. The desire to experience connection and enjoyment relates to both MCA's existing and prospective audiences, and our ability to evaluate and improve this experience will increase the diversity and satisfaction of our audiences.

MCA Chicago Capacity Needs

MCA has a unique opportunity today to build its evaluation capacity in a way that will enhance the staff's ability to create an environment for perspective-taking and social and emotional learning. In August 2020, the Museum converted 10 of its front-facing Visitor Experience Associate positions from part-time to full-time. This change enables us to train and retain in-gallery staff who can both facilitate and evaluate the learning experiences of our visitors. Then, in August 2021, the Museum promoted an exceptional manager with strong expertise in SEL to Associate Director of Interpretation. The Museum simultaneously reorganized the Learning

team to create two Manager of Interpretive Programming positions reporting to this Director. These staff changes increase our ability to develop new strategies for SEL in exhibitions.

Studies, Plans, and Best Practices Used to Develop Our Project: The MCA is committed to evaluating visitor outcomes in the museum and has evolved a practice of interpretation and evaluation over the past decade. In 2019 the museum commissioned Slover Linett to conduct a comprehensive visitor research study that would prove fundamental to shaping the museum's work on audience engagement. The results of the study revealed that the MCA had room to grow in how it communicated with visitors and achieved learning goals—underlining the criticality of interpretative practice to the museum's success.

The museum created the Associate Director of Interpretation position in 2015, who became a strong advocate for the visitor experience and reshaped the exhibition-making process at the MCA over the following five years. In that time, interpretation became the driver of the conversation around exhibition planning; in fact, interpretation and evaluation are housed within the museum's Artistic Division. The museum instituted a structure of interpretive planning processes that put visitor-focused thinking at the center of its practice and established regular visitor research practices that have built on the MCA's understanding of visitor experience. This practice included interpretive training for staff to standardize onboarding for curatorial and editorial staff that familiarizes them with the interpretive process at the MCA. The museum also built a culture of audience evaluation in the Artistic and Audience Divisions, increasing staff awareness of visitor outcomes related to learning through qualitative and quantitative research methods including front-end testing, exit interviews, timing and tracking studies, and observational studies. Despite limitations of budget and staff resources, the help of volunteers, students, and third-party evaluators has provided valuable insight into visitor outcomes. These insights have prompted significant changes to our visitor experience and interpretive practices, such as improved wayfinding, increased in-gallery seating, and changes to wall text conventions.

The MCA now stands ready to take the next step in its evolution as a contemporary art museum that contributes not only to knowledge learning, but to SEL, from visitors' interpersonal skills and their ability to see from multiple perspectives to their sense of personal and collective agency in the world around them. The MCA is moving away from didactic goals and toward social and emotional goals. This requires the development of new evaluative tools. To enact this, we need to build processes that evaluate outcomes that are behavioral, interactive, and emotional. The opportunity to build an interdepartmental evaluation team that can take on this challenge will accelerate our growth in this area.

The MCA has done some early research around social and emotional engagement in its evaluation. One compelling case study (attached): The MCA's 2019 *Prisoner of Love* exhibition, which featured Arthur Jafa's seven-minute film *Love Is The Message, The Message Is Death* (2016). Dealing with issues of race, oppression, love, and violence, this artwork challenges viewers. The MCA's interpretive team designed a space within the exhibition where visitors could write a response on a card containing a prompt, eliciting thousands of responses. The MCA also undertook new approaches to in-gallery staff training, preparing security guard and visitor experience staff with a pre-screening and building strategies for interacting with visitors experiencing the work. The MCA's evaluation of the exhibition underlined the early success and necessity of this new focus on social and emotional outcomes.

Today the MCA faces an opportunity and a challenge in expanding the MCA's evaluation to encompass SEL. First, the opportunity: The creation of a team of ten full-time Visitor Experience staff in mid-2020. This shift in organizational design increases retention and allows for intensive training. It bolstered the museum's ability to interact with and observe visitors in the museum, a key need to increase evaluation. At the same time, the MCA faces a challenge: One of budget and the staff resources necessary to develop its evaluation practices to encompass SEL and train the museum's team of Visitor Experience Associates to conduct evaluation. This highlights the need for a training program and the development of a set of MCA-specific evaluation practices, developed in consultation with audience research experts.

Who Will Benefit from Our Project:

The short-term beneficiaries of this project are the cross-departmental Museum staff, 19 of whom will receive intensive training in evaluation and supervised practice, while also learning one-on-one interpretation skills. More long term, the Museum will benefit as an organization by re-structuring evaluation to be both broader and more inclusive of learning outcomes, and more sustainable by relying on professionally trained full-time staff to conduct those evaluations. Long-term beneficiaries also include the MCA's audiences and partners, who prior research tells us are both receptive to and in search of the social and emotional learnings offered by engaging deeply with contemporary art.

Advancing the MCA's Strategic Plan: The three overarching goals of the MCA's strategic plan are: 1) Champion revelatory art for all, 2) Spark civic exchange and transformation, and 3) Achieve sustainable and purpose-driven operations. This five-year plan, which began implementation in July 2020, contains a primary goal to build Chicago's social belonging (part of #2 above). As part of this work, the MCA will redesign core performance, engagement, and learning programs to center connection, trust, empathy, interpersonal learning, and mutual responsibility. Speaking to #3 above, the Visitor Engagement department was recently re-organized, giving us ten full-time Visitor Experience Assistants who are integral to this project. The evaluation project outlined here will let us build the capacity required to measure our progress toward a key goal of our strategic plan (building social belonging) and do so in a way that helps us achieve sustainable operations.

How This Project Addresses the Goals of the Museums Empowered Initiative: Through the *Belonging at the MCA* project, we will better serve our public by improving their SEL learning outcomes via a professional development program that increases capacity for interpretation and evaluation activities by our staff across departments. These purposeful changes to the MCA's interpretation and evaluation programs will generate systemic change within the museum by driving key goals of the strategic plan by investing in young museum professionals entering the field.

How This Project Aligns with the Evaluation Category: Through a program of trainings, workshops, and tutorials, along with focused reporting of evaluation results that drive change, this project will empower the MCA staff to think evaluatively, specifically in relationship to social and emotional engagement. This includes exploratory front-end evaluation practices that emphasize listening to visitors and acknowledging the biases that might lurk in conventional evaluation practices, as well as formative and summative evaluation practices to measure the impact MCA is having on its visitors and the Chicago community. The results yielded by these evaluations will shape interpretive practices and programs for social emotional learning in order to best serve our diverse audience, while also growing a robust cross-departmental evaluation team and developing an

institutional evaluation framework. This project will also increase staff capacity for asking important questions, gathering meaningful data, and responding to outcomes-based data with intentionality.

2. PROJECT WORK PLAN

Specific Activities, Including Evaluation, to be Carried Out: The MCA will implement a project called *Belonging at the MCA* between September 1, 2022 – December 30, 2024, focused on building an internal team of staff members who are trained in the evaluation of social and emotional engagement and learning, and developing a cohesive evaluation strategy around social and emotional engagement in the museum.

Phase 1: Training the MCA Evaluation Team – Building the Foundations of SEL Evaluation Thinking and Practice (9/1/22 – 2/28/23; 6 months)

The MCA will engage museum evaluation consultancy Audience Focus to introduce Interpretation and Visitor Experience staff members in evaluation thinking and practice, and utilize audience focus panels to explore current visitor experience at the MCA through the lens of social belonging.

Introduction to Evaluation Workshop: The Evaluation Team will attend a workshop, facilitated by Audience Focus, that introduces the foundations of evaluation.

Monthly Asynchronous Evaluation Capacity Building Tutorials: Audience Focus will facilitate 4-6 asynchronous training tutorials that Evaluation Team members can access during the training phase. The tutorials will be incorporated into a growing library of evaluation resources that the evaluation team can use to improve their own professional development and train future staff around evaluation practices. Topics will include measuring social-emotional outcomes, equitable evaluation, data analysis, and the presentation and communication of evaluative results.

Audience Panels : Incorporating community members from around Chicago, Audience Focus will conduct three panels focused on visitor experience in the MCA, inviting panel members to explore the museum and return for a 60-minute discussion of their experience with a focus on SEL and social belonging.

Presentation & Reflection: The Evaluation Team will present the outcomes of Phase 1 to the Artistic Division (Learning, Visual Art, and Performance & Public Practice) in preparation for Phase 2.

Phase 2: Further Development of MCA SEL Evaluation Practices – Putting Theory to Practice – Piloting the New Evaluation Framework & Tools (3/1/23 – 2/28/24; 12 months)

Working with Audience Focus, the MCA Evaluation Team—led by the Associate Director of Interpretation and Visitor Research—will apply the outcomes of Phase 1 to an evaluative project.

Training Workshop: Audience Focus will facilitate a live workshop with the Evaluation Team, with the intention of creating a curriculum through which to train other staff members on evaluation.

Evaluation: The Evaluation Team will conduct evaluation around two or more exhibitions at the MCA using the expanded framework developed in Phase 1.

Presentation: The Evaluation Team will present their findings to their colleagues in an open meeting, familiarizing the museum with the insights and updates to evaluative strategy.

Phase 3: Training the Trainers – Building Sustainability (3/1/24 – 8/30/24; 6 months)

Training Evaluators Workshop: The Evaluation Team will attend a workshop, facilitated by Audience Focus, that focuses on training their peers in the MCA in evaluation practices.

“Train the Trainers” Workshops: The Evaluation Team will conduct a series of training workshops attended by cross-departmental staff. They will introduce curatorial, editorial, and audience team members to evaluation and familiarize them with the goals of audience research. These team members will serve as evaluators on the floor of exhibitions twice a year to maintain a first-hand connection to audience experience.

Phase 4: Analysis and Reporting (9/1/24 – 12/30/24; 4 months)

Post-project measurement and summative narrative, quantitative, and financial reporting, to include evaluations of challenges and opportunities as well as successes, on the project will occur in Phase 4.

Risks and mitigation plan: This project creates new responsibilities and demands on the time of the museum staff who will be trained and then work as facilitators and evaluators. We will monitor time pressures on them and their other obligations and make adjustments as required.

Project planning, implementation, and management: This project will be led by the Director of Curatorial Strategy, Associate Director of Interpretation and Audience Research and the Director of Audience Experience. The first oversees exhibition and program planning, the second leads exhibition and program evaluation, and the latter oversees both general visitor research and the front-facing Visitor Experience team. Audience Focus will also play a critical role in facilitating the training of staff members. Other key personnel include the Director of Content Strategy, who oversees editorial and video teams who produce interpretive materials; the Ticketing Systems Manager, who implements general visitor surveys and data collection; and the teams of Visitor Experience Associates, Managers of Interpretive Programming, and Curatorial Assistants who will be trained in evaluation (an organizational chart is attached).

Equitable and mutually beneficial team structure: The project will not only expand the team of people conducting evaluation at the MCA, but it will also strengthen the museum’s connections to its community. It will make it possible to co-design museum evaluation with a group of people who represent a more varied and diverse set of voices than the small Interpretation team at the MCA, deepening the museum’s ability to hold meaningful conversations with visitors and staff members alike. Lastly, the training and education provided will create new professional development pathways.

Resources needed to carry out the activities: The staff resources associated with executing this project include planning and management by key personnel, and time from the Evaluation Team, which will spend an estimated 18 hours per month conducting evaluation in the galleries, and roughly 12 hours annually on training workshops and tutorials. Financial resources include consulting fees for Audience Focus for multiple workshops, tutorials, and audience panels in coordination with the MCA team. The project will also require hardware and software to record, notate, and analyze data.

Tracking progress toward intended results: The MCA will work with Audience Focus to create an internal evaluation structure that tracks the project goals prior to its start and at the end of each of the three phases. This data will lead to a final report on the project’s outcomes.

Sharing the project results: The outcomes of this project will be shared in presentation form throughout the MCA, including an all-staff presentation at the close of Phase 2. The Evaluation and Interpretation teams will

also document and write about the project, and these narratives may be shared through professional channels (journals; conferences).

3. PROJECT RESULTS

Intended Results:

This project will increase the museum's access to data on visitors' social emotional learning, helping the MCA in its efforts to become a more welcoming, equitable, and inclusive space for civic and community engagement by fostering social emotional learning. It will do this in several ways:

- By bringing MCA evaluation fully in-house, allowing the museum to better support visitor research efforts and apply evaluation strategy in a cohesive, museum-wide way.
- By training the MCA's Visitor Experience Assistants to conduct evaluation within the museum, including qualitative and quantitative evaluation methodologies. They will become fluent in evaluation strategies and understand the underlying concepts guiding visitor research.
- By doubling the MCA's existing evaluation studies to include at least five exhibitions per year and the MCA's annual performance season.
- By further developing the MCA's evaluative strategy to include SEL outcomes, in addition to knowledge outcomes, increasing the museum's understanding of how visitors respond to exhibitions, and what they feel, do and think while at the museum.
- By evolving MCA's exhibition-making practice based on this evaluative data, putting these aspects of the visitor experience at the center of the museum experience.

Change in the intended audiences as a result of our project:

Goal 1: Train and develop MCA's young and diverse Visitor Experience Staff in audience engagement and evaluation practices. MCA staff increase their understanding of evaluation theory – including culturally-responsive and equity-based evaluation.

- MCA staff increase their understanding of evaluation theory – including culturally-responsive and equity-based evaluation.
- MCA staff increase their understanding of the process of evaluation, including: 1) how to ask meaningful questions, how to design and implement an evaluation study; how to select methods; how to conduct quantitative and qualitative analysis, and how to interpret and communicate results to stakeholders.
- MCA staff increase their ability to conduct evaluation with audiences.
- MCA staff increase their ability to develop logic models designed to measure SEL, including detailed outcomes and indicators.
- MCA staff increase their ability to train others to conduct evaluation.

Goal 2: Train and develop MCA's Curatorial and Interpretive staff to incorporate audience feedback in developing exhibition experiences.

- MCA staff are better able to interpret evaluation findings.
- MCA staff are better able to use evaluation findings to inform practice.
- Evaluation findings are used more often for decision-making purposes, including current and future program and exhibition improvement.

Goal 3: Develop experiences that positively impact MCA visitors' social and emotional learning.

Outcomes and indicators for this goal will be developed and refined during Phase 1 and 2, but will include:

- Visitors share with one another or with Museum staff about their experience of the artwork and their own perspective.
- Visitors recognize the feelings and perspectives of others.
- Visitors describe and/or evaluate what they experience in MCA exhibitions and programs.
- Visitors reflect upon actions they have taken or would like to take related to the artwork they see.

Data collected, measured, and reported to measure your project's success:

MCA Staff: The MCA will do a pre/post project evaluation to measure the project's impact on MCA staff. This will entail a baseline assessment at the beginning of the project to determine existing beliefs, understanding, and skills related to evaluation. The evaluator will collect post-project data corresponding to the baseline data to assess changes in knowledge, attitudes, skills, and behaviors related to evaluation and evaluative thinking. Methods for collecting post-program data will include individual and/or group interviews, online questionnaires that contain both close-ended (scaled) and open-ended (exploratory) lines of questioning, onsite observations of meetings or other events, and review of evaluation frameworks or other tangible products resulting from the project.

MCA Audience: At the end of the project, MCA staff will use the newly created evaluation tools that were designed to measure SEL to assess the degree to which visitors are being impacted by their experiences at MCA. Outcomes and indicators will be further developed during Phase 1 and 2 of this project. Findings will be situated in the context of evaluations previously conducted at MCA and within other research conducted on SEL in museums more broadly.

Tangible Products Resulting from This Project:

1. Social and Emotional learning Integrated into MCA Evaluation Process: SSEL goals will be integrated into MCA Interpretation & Evaluation Process. These will be added to the MCA Interpretation and Evaluation Manual.
2. Social & Emotional Learning Logic Model: An institutional logic model will clearly articulate and ensure alignment between MCA's strategic plan goal of Social Belonging and the interpretive and evaluative practices of the MCA.
3. Social & Emotional Evaluation Toolkit: A toolkit will include the above two resources, as well as articles, evaluation methods, samples of evaluation tools used to gather data, and sample studies developed through Evaluation Labs.
4. Evaluation Plan: An action plan will identify priority evaluation projects to be undertaken following the project period.

Sustaining the Benefit of This Project: The increased capacity that would result from this project should be self-sustaining at its conclusion. Moving the evaluation process from volunteer college students to full-time staff will ease scheduling and reliability issues. Additionally, training trainers (Managers across departments) will ensure continuity after any evaluator staff changes. That said, since we will work closely with Audience Focus over the course of the project, and we will be able to bring them back for additional trainings or workshops should the need arise in subsequent years.

